



Advent

GA



sacred time

Advent at Gardner-Webb, 2005

Dan Goodman

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The Christian calendar marks time according to two seasons: *ordinary time* and *sacred time*. Sacred time includes Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and, finally, Pentecost. But it all begins with Advent, the first season of the Christian year.

Advent is the celebration of Christ's coming—both the joyful remembrance of his first coming in lowliness and the anticipation of his second coming in justice and triumph over evil. Advent, then, calls us to look backwards *and* forwards as we reflect upon God's redemption of the world.

Christians celebrate the season of Advent in a variety of ways. Churches often hold a “hanging of the green” service to decorate the sanctuary with evergreens to signify the new and everlasting life that we find in Christ. Churches also may display an Advent wreath that surrounds five candles. A new candle is lit each Sunday of Advent, and the center candle—the Christ candle—is lit on Christmas day. These traditions, of course, can also be celebrated in the home, with children lighting the Advent candles and families reading Scripture and praying together during the season.

However you and your church celebrate Advent, I pray that this collection of Advent

reflections from the Gardner-Webb family will enrich your journey through the Advent season. In the pages that follow, you will find for each day of Advent a series of Scripture readings and a short devotional written by a member of the Gardner-Webb community. Whether you use this guide with your family or with your church, whether you celebrate with carols and laughter or prayer and penance, whether you are home for the holidays or traveling to visit loved ones, may the four themes of Advent—hope, peace, joy, and love—touch your heart with God's goodness and stir your soul to gracious living as we await the coming of Christ. For this is *Sacred Time* indeed!

Finally, I must extend my thanksgiving to several persons without whose help this project simply would not exist. First, I'm grateful to the 28 other writers who crafted such eloquent reflections. I also appreciate the support of Chuck Bugg, Jack Buchanan, Scoot Dixon, and Melanie Nogalski. Lydia Johnson was invaluable as a compiler and editor. And my friend and former colleague (and, I should add, alumnus of Gardner-Webb), Perry Hildreth, provided much of the framework and inspiration for this project. Thanks to all of them, and a blessed Advent season to all of you!

hope

Sunday November 27

Amos 1:1-5, 13-2:8
1 Thess. 5:1-11
Luke 21:5-19

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"God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us."

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison

The most demanding theme of the Advent season is the theme of waiting. Hope, peace, joy, love—these come easier to us. When they don't—when we refuse to love or give up hope—we know we err and the emptiness we feel at their absence reminds us of their necessity. But what to do with waiting?

Most of us don't wait well, to be sure. Our impatience gets the best of us, especially when we're waiting on reward or vindication. In today's Scripture reading, the prophet thunders, "The Lord roars from Zion...and will not revoke the judgment," and so Israel waits for God to visit punishment upon her enemies (Amos 1:2-3). The Thessalonian Christians wait with great anticipation for the day of the Lord that will come in the fullness of the times and seasons (I Thess. 5:1). The disciples of Jesus, even, wait and wonder about the end of days, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" (Luke 21:7).

How are we supposed to wait during Advent?

If we're waiting for the day of the Lord to bring "sudden destruction" upon those who live in darkness, we'll miss the quiet revelation of this season. If we're waiting for God's anger to burn hot against our enemies, we'll pass through Advent without knowing the peace of Christ that stills our spirits. And besides, as Amos' audience eventually heard, the righteous anger of God that may consume our opponents is just as likely to consume us in the end, too.

Waiting now—our waiting during Advent—can only be the waiting of weakness. We are powerless to rouse God's judgment or to call forth God's retribution. We stand numb before the enemies of peace and justice in our world. We simply wait for God. Wait for Christ to come. Wait in weakness. But waiting in weakness is waiting just right. Christ came to us unadorned with splendor, but resting in the meekness of a manger. And we come to him, he says, when we feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner. So this Advent season let us wait for him in weakness. For it is, as Bonhoeffer writes, the only way in which our waiting will culminate with the presence of Christ.

One of my favorite Christmas memories—and life lessons about hope—happened during the bleakest Advent season of my life. A single parent of two small children, I was facing my first Christmas alone. Furthermore, I was having to miss my favorite Sunday worship service of the year—the choir’s special Advent program. (Important note: I attend a church, First Baptist of Greenville, SC, where the choir is so good they are sometimes asked to perform with the Greenville Symphony Orchestra!)

I was missing this service because that Sunday happened to be my turn to keep preschoolers during worship. I was especially disappointed about missing the program this year, though, because I really needed the lift it was sure to provide my tired spirit. So I thought of a way I might be able to enjoy that marvelous music and still fulfill my duty. I told my three-year-old charges, in my best “I-have-a-wonderful-secret-for-you” voice, that we were going to do something very special. Of course they were immediately excited, as only tots can be, and ready for their surprise. I said we were going to experience something like being at the very first Christmas. We trekked to a Christmas tree near my large church’s sanctuary, and I told Luke’s Christmas story, ending where the angels sang the glad tidings to the shepherds.

Then I said we would tiptoe over to the great doors at the back of “big church,” sit down on the floor and wait quietly, and in a short time hear what it sounded like when the angels sang. Soon six wide-eyed three-year-olds and I were seated expectantly on the floor just outside the doors to the sanctuary from the narthex. My timing was perfect. No sooner were we settled than the choir burst into a thunderous, joyous “GLORIA!” Simultaneously, six little heads bent over to peek through the crack under the door and, unable to see much, turned—now saucer-eyed—to ask me in wonder: “Is that really angels?!”

In the years since, I have paused in what all too often is exhausting, meaningless Christmas clamor to be tickled and rejuvenated by that memory. No matter how numb or jaded or discouraged we let ourselves become, God—who loved the world enough to send His Son—still loves us enough to surprise us with joy. It can happen much more often if we keep the hope of children that behind a big door, there just might be angels!

This Christmas may we have the eyes and ears of children so that our hearts will stay open to wonder, ready at any moment to welcome God’s heralds, sent to tell us that the Lord is in our midst.

hope

**Monday
November 28**

Amos 2:6-16
2 Peter 1:1-11
Matthew 21:1-11

*Gayle Bolt Price
Professor of English, Dean of
the Graduate School*

hope

Tuesday
November 29

Amos 3:1-11
2 Peter 1:12-21
Matthew 21:12-22

Jack Buchanan
Vice President,
Admissions and Enrollment

When I was twelve years old, I announced to my mother that I did not possess, nor did I wish to possess, the Christmas Spirit. Discovering myself at that awkward age between late childhood and early adulthood, everything surrounding the Christmas season seemed juvenile, contrived, artificial, and too pedestrian for me. The excitement, magic, and wonder of the season abandoned me. In response I developed a jaded maturity, a twelve-year-old attitude, about Christmas. I appreciated and secretly espoused the “bah humbug” philosophy of Ebenezer Scrooge, although I did not have the courage to publicly proclaim it.

My mother quietly observed my simmering seasonal dissatisfaction for a couple of days. Then, she explained that it was fine for me to believe as I desired concerning Christmas. It was really fine. My family understood. Further, being too mature to enjoy the frivolous season, Christmas presents would surely offend my adult sensitivity. Thus, out of respect for my position on the holiday there would be no presents... NO PRESENTS. Needless to say, my cynicism abated and I created room in my life for Christmas and for the presents that accompanied the holiday.

Yet, I really did not have the Christmas Spirit.

I really did lose my Christmas Joy. The excitement, magic and wonder of the season really did abandon me. When the wide-eyed Christmas hope and expectation of childhood was gone, I did not have anything with which to replace it.

I wish at that time in my life I had known about the celebration of Advent. (My childhood church could completely pay the appropriate homage due the Christ Child on the Sunday morning and evening preceding Christmas.) The hope of Advent challenges me to make every Christmas season the best season of my life. Advent spiritually resurrects and reinvigorates the excitement, magic, and wonder of childhood Christmas. Hope is at the center of this week, this season. Hope for deliverance, for salvation, for life. Hope is born in a baby in a manger.

Come thou long expected Jesus. Come quickly.

In the mid-nineties my family and I lived in Prague. Living in central Europe after the fall of THE WALL was remarkable. THE WALL was physical but also symbolic, dividing Europe into two parts—one free and the other living under totalitarian regimes. THE WALL became such an accepted aspect of life that people thought of it as one of life's *givens*. It was part of the *way things were*, part of the *way things always would be*. No one predicted the events of the late 80s and early 90s. The fall of THE WALL, above all else, was *surprising*.

Surprising as those events were, they did not happen “all-of-a-sudden” out of a vacuum. Under the surface, a multitude of small actions and incremental changes laid the foundation for the massive changes of the late 1980s. Some died in that struggle. Others were imprisoned. There were those who, against seemingly insurmountable odds, fought against the idea that THE WALL was a permanent aspect of reality. What motivated them? What gave them hope when there was no visible evidence that things could possibly change?

While we lived in Prague, Václav Havel was president of the Czech Republic. Havel was a former playwright who had suffered persecution, imprisonment and forced hard labor at the hands of the Communist government of

Czechoslovakia. In 1986, before the fall of THE WALL, Havel said the following concerning hope (in *Disturbing the Peace*): “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out....The deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works...is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’”

Advent reminds us of a hope that comes from “elsewhere.” This hope is not a naïve, unrealistic “I wish it will happen” kind of hope. Nor is it a “the odds look favorable” kind of hope. It is a hope grounded in the One who breaks into history with the power of redeeming love. It is a hope grounded in the One who surprises us with grace and mercy. It is a hope which challenges structures of injustice and oppression. It is a hope which “disturbs the peace” in the sense that it represents a radical alternative to the way things are, but which is “peace”-ful in the sense that the alternative it presents is a vision of the *shalom* God intends for us. Advent does not imply a passive waiting for God to solve our problems. It reminds us that there is a divine perspective concerning *the way things are* which is a source of genuine hope.

hope

**Wednesday
November 30**

Amos 3:12-4:5

2 Peter 3:1-10

Matthew 21:23-32

Kent Blevins

*Associate Professor of Religion,
Department of Religious Studies
and Philosophy*

hope

Thursday December 1

Amos 4:6-13
2 Peter 3:11-18
Matthew 21:33-46

Randall Cooper
Assistant Registrar, School of
Divinity student

When I was 16 years old, I read C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. I was reminded by today's readings of a line in that story that has helped to shape my understanding of God. In the story, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are telling the children about the lion-king Aslan. Lucy, a little girl, begins to be frightened at the prospect of meeting such an awesome creature and asks if Aslan is safe. Mr. Beaver replies, "Safe? ... 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

When I surrendered to God's call to be a pastor, I did it whole-heartedly and without reservation, having no idea what lay ahead of me. The path was cloudy and dark, and I could only make out two stops in the distance up ahead. One was the finish of my once abandoned Bachelor's degree, and the other was the Pastorate. With only a vague notion of the path, and faith in my good God, I set out on the journey. I knew God was good, but I wasn't always sure that he was safe. I did not always understand what he was up to in my life, but he took me seriously when I told him that I wanted him to do whatever he needed to do to make me the pastor he wanted.

For me, it meant dealing with emotional issues that I would have preferred leaving deeply

buried. God kept insisting that I trust him and follow him into the wilderness to confront my monsters, but confronting them scared me. It didn't seem safe. I was balanced too precariously on the edge of sanity and I knew I would fall if I was jarred the least bit, but God kept calling through good times and tough times. I finally surrendered once again to his will and followed him. It was tough and I often wanted to quit, but the call of God was strong, and he was persistent, and I found healing, hope, and wholeness through the struggle. Playing it safe would have left me broken and weak. He had a greater vision and plan in mind than I could ever have imagined.

So today, once again, I breathe a prayer to my good God, pull on my traveling clothes, grasp my walking staff, set my face into the sun, and take the first step on the path he has laid out before me. I know very little about the path ahead, but I know my next step, and I know my ultimate goal. I've also learned that God is too good to leave me walking around in my safe circles. He has a greater plan.

I came from a large family and had always hoped to have at least three children of my own someday. After being married five years, the time seemed right to begin. After several months, I was finally pregnant with my first child, Rebecca. When she turned two, the time seemed right to have another child, but I got some bad news from my doctor—I had a fibrous tumor on my uterus that, although benign, would multiply, so I would not be able to have anymore children. This was a hard blow for me, and I drove straight to my pastor's house before going home, too devastated to face this possibility. He prayed with me and encouraged me to hope in the Lord and what HE can do. I did conceive my second child shortly afterwards but lost him through a miscarriage. I cried out to God in my despair and once again claimed in His name the hope for another child. I soon was blessed with my second daughter, Laura, and then in another three and a half years, a son, Adam. My husband and I decided that three children were enough, and so we followed through with the necessary surgery to finalize our "family planning." Following this, I went through a few months of feeling depressed about our decision. Just to demonstrate God's sense of humor for His children, a few years after my surgery God decided to bless me with

a fourth child, my daughter, Carlee!

I vividly remember the day when I was hospitalized to have surgery for a tubal pregnancy and the loud laughter of my husband when the doctor informed us that I had a healthy pregnancy! This is why I call God's answer to my previous despair and depression "my hilarious hope." He hears us when we cry out to Him and always answers us, even though it is not always in the way we expect. In the same way, He wants us to hope in Him for all of our heart's desires.

And by the way, the tumor disappeared!

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

hope

**Friday
December 2**

Amos 5:1-17
Jude 1-16
Matthew 22:1-14

Sharon Webb
Academic Advisor,
GOAL Program

hope

**Saturday
December 3**

Amos 5:18-27
Jude 17-25
Matthew 22:15-22

*Doug Dickens
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and Counseling,
School of Divinity*

Seems like lots of life is spent in “waiting,” but have you discovered the great difference between *waiting* and *hoping*? Impatience has been more of a lifetime companion to me than has waiting—especially waiting *hopefully*. My life has been lived between moments of waiting: waiting to get my driver’s license...waiting to graduate from high school (or college, or graduate school)...waiting for our children to be born...waiting for the semester to begin...waiting. But what are we really waiting for? Like the Prophet Amos’ observation, many wait for the “day of the Lord,” but don’t really understand what that day will mean. Most of us find that our waiting moments are punctuated by frightening times of terror as well as joy, and disappointments as well as celebrations. We’re on the edge of Advent 2005, and I’m finding that as Patsy (my wife) and I marched through the Summer and Fall days fighting a life-threatening cancer, waiting is not enough. After months of chemotherapy, lots of prayers and days and nights interrupted by both fear and faith, “waiting” demands more from us than wishful thinking. I am aware that waiting really isn’t enough. Patsy and I wait daily for some good news, for a lower “cancer count,” for more strength, for any word of encouragement. But waiting is more than merely passing the time between physician appointments and a grueling chemotherapy schedule, it is not merely a task

for hospital “waiting rooms.” We’re living by waiting *in hope*, even if still impatient. We live in hope that God will answer prayers, that God will meet us in these troubles, and that we will be faithful through this awful struggle. Jürgen Moltmann tells a Talmud story about a rabbi who was considering what questions a Jew would probably have to answer at the Last Judgment. What would the Judge of the World ask? Of course, there were the obvious questions—Were you honest in your dealings with people? Were you just and righteous? Did you seek wisdom? Did you keep the Commandments? Finally a question popped into the rabbi’s mind which surprised even him. It was a question about Messiah. The Universal Judge will ask—“Did you hope for my Messiah?” Moltmann writes, “Is that not the question that will be asked? Did you hope for me? Did you keep hoping even when you nearly gave up? Did you endure to the end?” Jude challenges my Christmas waiting...even my Christian faith, in these days of waiting: “Keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life...” What a benediction for impatient pilgrims on a journey during Advent: “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy...” God, I hope so.

People for Peace (P4P) met on Friday night of the week Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans. We were exhausted from watching TV accounts of poor, elderly, and sick Americans abandoned with no food, water, or medicine. P4P meets monthly to share a potluck meal and encourage each other to promote peace in the world, but this time the mood in the room was far from peaceful as we heaped blame on poorly prepared and indifferent officials. We also heaped our paper plates with wonderful food: a mound of fried chicken, lovely broiled chickens seasoned with limes and lemons, a huge fruit salad, homemade bread with olive oil for dipping, bean salad, green salad, eggplant lasagna, cookies. The air conditioning was set so low I put on a sweater.

I became increasingly uncomfortable as the evening's program turned our attention to the issue of poverty in America. Did we bear any responsibility for people who couldn't afford a car or the gasoline needed to obey an evacuation order or who felt compelled to wait for that crucial check scheduled to arrive on September 1? And, if so, what did our failures have to do with peace?

It's hard to see a connection because *peace* is

not a positive condition for many Americans. It's only an absence—of noise (“give me some peace!”), of annoyance (“he’ll never give me peace until I . . .”), of life (“may she rest in peace”). Peace in the Bible is different because it's often actively associated with championing social justice. Today's Advent reading from Amos harshly condemns “those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall. . . . who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils” while ignoring the plight of others. Why should we read something so unsettling during Advent?

The answer is obvious. Advent is the time to reassess our commitments, including the commitment to peace. And Christ is born again each time we accept the challenge to make peace by promoting social justice, even in the most ordinary matters. Everyday choices such as voicing the concerns of the powerless in the workplace or driving the speed limit to use less gas and keep prices down show Christian concern for the poor. In a time focused on gift giving, living more unselfishly can be our gift to Christ. It is an appropriate way to welcome the Prince of Peace.

peace

**Sunday
December 4**

Amos 6: 1-14
2 Thess. 1:5-12,
Luke 1:57-68

*June Hadden Hobbs
Associate Professor of
English, Department of
English Language and
Literature*

peace

Monday December 5

Amos 7:1-9
Revelation 1:1-8
Matthew 22: 23-33

Eddie Stepp

*Assistant Professor of Religious
Studies and Philosophy*

One year ago, my peace took a beating. In December of 2004, after visits to several specialists and a variety of scans, doctors discovered that my wife had a large tumor growing in her chest cavity that was displacing organs and beginning to mash on her trachea. Four days after the discovery, my wife was wheeled into surgery so that the doctors could extract this large, unknown mass. The range of emotions was intense, but peace was not among them. Fear of the unknown and anxiety held dominion over my mind and heart. Deep inside I knew that God was present, that I was not abandoned in my walk through the valley, but my circumstances overwhelmed my vision. I wanted my wife to be whole, for my girls to have their mom for many more years, and for there to be no cancer. My prayers were desperate. My peace was getting battered by the unexpected.

I assumed that I would be fine during the surgery. I was not. It was an anxiety filled five hours. When the doctor emerged from surgery, I was torn between hope and dread. "Good news." He had been able to get all of the mass – and it was not cancerous! Technically it was not a tumor but a lymph node gone berserk, and once it was removed, it was gone for good. Good news, indeed!

In the hours and days that followed, peace

returned with a rush, unbowed by my lack of faith in the presence of God. As I reflected on this sense of peace, I realized that it had not come as a result of having my prayer answered in a far grander way than I could have imagined. Rather, my peace was a result of my "vision correction" that not only was God with me as I walked through the valley, but God was present in the valley long before I arrived. And if the outcome had been different, a reality for many who have prayed fervently for wholeness and healing only to experience neither, I hope that I could have affirmed the truth: God is always present with us and a peace that transcends our circumstances is available through Him.

Christmas, and this joyful season of anticipation, will never be quite the same for me. Through my experience, I have been reminded that in the Christ child, God speaks a word of "good news" to a world that is both anxious and hopeful. And to a world desperately in need of peace and a reminder of the presence of God, God gives the gift of Jesus – the Incarnate One – God with us – so that we might know peace.

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

— Matt. 22:37-39

It was one of those days when the busyness of life got the best of me, when I felt like not much of a minister, not much of a Christian. An email to a friend bemoaning my lack of spiritual giftedness prompted her simple reply: “You have the biggest heart of anyone I know.”

Love is not a gift a goal-oriented perfectionist like me particularly wants. I can’t tell whether I’m doing “love” well enough. I can’t check “love” off my to-do list at the end of the day. To love is awkward and frightening and intangible and often looks like *doing nothing*. I’ve sometimes wondered what exactly it was Jesus was *doing* during all those years before the public ministry we read about in the gospels. What did He actually *do* on that first Christmas? A beautiful answer came to me through a French translation of the carol *Silent Night*: “The mystery foretold is accomplished. This Child asleep on the hay *is* infinite Love.” Jesus *was* Love, from the moment He came to earth. His every act flowed from *who He was*.

I worry so much about what I should *do* that I often forget that just *being* is sometimes a more powerful expression of love than any act I could perform. What I would do, others could do, some better. Yet no one else can *be* who God has created me to be. Of course there is a time for action, and God forbid we should ignore that; but there are many times when the best thing to do for those who are hurting is simply to “waste” time on them, to be still and listen and love. Instead of multitasking myself to the point of exhaustion in the name of Christian service, maybe I should be looking more closely at what Christ did on Christmas: He showed up. He gave Himself. He just *was*, the Incarnation of the Great I AM. This season, let us stop long enough to “waste” some time in purposeful reflection on the mystery of Love sleeping in a stable, and let us give to God and others the gift of who we are and who we are becoming because of our encounter with Love.

peace

**Tuesday
December 6**

Amos 7:10-17, 24-25
Revelation 1:9-16
Matthew 22:34-46

*Stacy N. Sergeant
Graduate Resident
Director, Decker Hall*

peace

Wednesday December 7

Amos 8:1-14
Revelation 1:17-2:7
Matthew 23:1-12

Sheri Adams
Professor of Church History,
School of Divinity

I grew up in a tiny Louisiana town twelve miles from the Mississippi River. We crossed the river on a car-carrying ferry. To board the ferry we joined a line of cars waiting on one side. This was before air-conditioned cars, so we hung our heads out the window or sat on the hood and watched the ferry approach. When our turn came to board, we started the car and drove up the ramp. Our parents always hoped to park in the spot that allowed us to be the first or second car to drive off the ferry on the other side, but my brothers and I always hoped to be stuck in the back somewhere so the adventure would last longer. As soon as the drawbridge of the ferry was raised, we were allowed out of the car to “explore” the ferry, play with friends, or pretend we were crossing the ocean to exotic places. On one trans-Atlantic crossing, I took my canvas “tenny” shoe off to try on the glass slipper, and—plop—my real shoe fell into the Mississippi! When I breathlessly reported to my parents that one of my shoes had fallen in the water, I was met with the profound observation that it was dumb to take my shoe off so close to the edge of the ferry. Dumb? Maybe so, but a girl really can’t try on a glass slipper with a tenny shoe on. As the day wore on, I appreciated in a way I had not before the value of shoes. Asphalt under a July sun in Louisiana is HOT! So is the gravel and some of the pieces are SHARP! Even the grass was hot and had

little briars that stuck in my feet. Before we got home that night, my feet were burned and bruised. The next time I was on the ferry and the prince’s messenger arrived with the glass slipper, I tried it on right next to the car!

Perhaps because of that experience, I was deeply moved by a picture in the *Charlotte Observer* a couple of years ago. The picture was of just the feet of a person. On one foot was a threadbare flip-flop; on the other, a tennis shoe, full of holes, no strings. I stared at it and was moved to both compassion and to shame. Compassion that some have so little; shame, of course, because I “need” so much. I clipped it and put it where I will be reminded to continue to work on what I think I must have.

It was an eerie feeling to read the passage in Amos a few days after Katrina hit New Orleans. Dead bodies. Many wailings. Trample on the needy. Bring ruin to the poor. Buying the poor and needy a pair of shoes. A pair of shoes. Shoes—two of them, that match and fit. Not a luxury, but a necessity. Imagine my delight to read in *The Pilot* about the group, Samaritans Feet, whose goal is to provide 10 million pairs of shoes to children all over the world. I’ll pray the person in my picture gets a pair.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.” (Matthew 23:23)

As a professional musician, you might think that when I am in my car, I listen to a lot of music from the radio or CD player. That is true, but I like to listen to other programs as well, particularly from nationally known ministers or ministries that I have grown to respect. One of my favorite programs is *Money Matters* from Crown Financial Ministries. I like to think of myself as a savvy investor, and I enjoy listening to their strategies, though my dabbling in the market has not made me any fortunes—yet. I especially like it when the hosts not only base their answers on biblical foundations but also listen to the heart of the caller. Their discernment implies that they’re listening to more than just the monetary dilemma, but, more importantly, to the spirit behind the call.

I am a firm believer that our church members should tithe. A lot of financial strains in the church would disappear if we followed that

biblical principle, and our Christian brothers and sisters would see God’s blessings pour out. However, without disregarding that tenet, more significant is the principle of showing justice, mercy and faithfulness. In this Advent season, we sing songs and state the importance of the act of giving, but shouldn’t showing those around us these other qualities be of more magnitude? What better time of year than now to renew our vows not only to monetarily give back to God what is already His but also to reach out to others with acts of kindness when undeserving? We can be proactive in movements towards seeing impartiality accomplished and be faithful to God when we feel like it or not.

Events will occur in your journey this Advent that will allow you to fulfill all these qualities—giving (tithing and beyond), justice, mercy and faithfulness. Anticipate that God will set those circumstances before you. So today, predetermine that you will show these Christ-like qualities wherever you go or to whomever you meet. And maybe, through your actions, you’ll be preaching the gospel at all times, even without words (St. Francis of Assisi).

peace

**Thursday
December 8**

Amos 9:1-10
Revelation 2:8-17
Matthew 23:13-26

Paul Etter
Assistant Professor of Music,
Department of Fine Arts

peace

**Friday
December 9**

Haggai 1:1-15
Revelation 2:18-29
Matthew 23:27-39

Lydia Johnson
*Adjunct GOAL Professor,
Graduate School Admissions
Counselor*

Thinking about peace gives no easy answer. With the ongoing war in Iraq, the other international conflicts, the tension between various church denominations, and the devastating 2005 hurricane season, peace seems absent. I left for Ocean Springs, Mississippi as I began to write this devotional. I read the assigned passages and thought, "These have *nothing* to do with peace."

I hoped helping those in Ocean Springs would give me some insight into peace. Instead, I had less to say about peace and more complaints to level at God. Peace became a bitter word in my mouth, because Hurricane Katrina's wake was a war zone. My heart sank like feet in muddy beach sand, and the peaceful calm after the storm became as incomprehensible as the peace of God. The smooth sea in Ocean Springs haunted me with its peacefulness. My thoughts on peace seemed as useless as discarded sea shells, and I wanted to toss those thoughts up into the wind and out into the water, yelling, "There ain't no peace here, God!"

So I went back to the passages, which eerily matched the destruction I had seen. In Haggai, God condemns selfishness and worldly-mindedness with these words: "What you brought home, I blew away. Why? Because of my house, which remains a ruin." In Matthew,

the "whitewashed tombs" mirrored gutted houses, creeping with mold. In Katrina terms, the Pharisees Jesus scolds try to light one votive candle to cover the smells of rotten food and flood-soaked carpets. Jesus cries, "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Jesus' words convey such sorrow that I realized we are not the only ones grieving and longing for peace not found.

These passages suggest peace seems out of reach because of our misplaced focus and self-centeredness. When Jesus cries that he longs for the children of Jerusalem to be gathered together, I realized I *had* found the meaning of peace in Ocean Springs. I did not find peace alone with my thoughts on that Mississippi beach, but instead when I worked alongside of my brothers and sisters in Christ who lost everything in the hurricane. In those few days, I tended to five other people's desperate needs rather than being consumed with my own concerns. I tasted peace in seeing and responding to the needs of Jesus' other children. That we recognize our connection to God and others in ways that are not self-seeking is the reality Jesus cries out for; this is where we can hope to find peace.

Do you remember the award winning television show "All in the Family" featuring that chauvinist, Archie Bunker, and his wacky wife, Edith? To be completely honest, this was one of those shows that my Mom and Dad forbade me to watch, but I do recall the theme song, "Those Were the Days." Archie and Edith made their best (or maybe it was their worst) effort as they sang these words:

*"Boy, the way Glen Miller played, Songs that made the hit parade.
Guys like us, we had it made. Those were the days."*

If "All in the Family" had appeared on the television screens in Jerusalem during the ministry of the prophet Haggai, "Those Were the Days" would most certainly have been the theme song of many of the people to whom Haggai preached. After 18 years of neglecting work on the temple, the people resume work on the house of the Lord, but it quickly becomes apparent that the temple they are erecting will never equal the splendor of Solomon's temple. All the reminders of the mighty acts of God are gone and their eyes can only fill with tears at the memories of what used to be compared to what it is now. They are mourning a past that can never return.

The same is often true of our own lives. Many

of us live life longing for what used to be, always comparing past glory to our current circumstances. What is worse is that hanging on to what used to be often clouds our vision to what can be by the grace and power of Almighty God. Yet, to a struggling and despondent people (both then and now), God comes in his covenant faithfulness and says, in essence, "Be strong, I am with you, you build more than you see."

God had a purpose for the temple they were building, so much so that God declared "the glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house...and in this place, I will grant peace" (v. 9). The Jews of Haggai's day couldn't clearly see it and what they could see seemed insignificant. But God was committed to completing what he started.

He still is. And just as God had a purpose for the temple, he has a purpose for our lives. We can't always clearly see it and what we do see often seems insignificant; however, we continue to build, trusting the One who takes the fruit of our labor and makes it glorious beyond measure.

Remember, we build more than we see.

peace

**Saturday
December 10**

Haggai 2:1-19
Revelation 3:1-6
Matthew 24:1-14

*Tracy C. Jessup
Assistant Dean of
Students and Minister
to the University*

joy

Sunday December 11

Amos 9:11-15
2 Thess. 2:1-3, 13-17
John 5:30-47

Ozzie McFarland
Assistant Professor Physical
Education, Wellness, and
Sport Studies

Joy! Without a doubt when I think of joy, I think of my children. All parents have stories of their children. I am no exception.

When my oldest son was two he was putting puzzles together one morning as we were preparing for church. "Dad, can you help me put this puzzle together?" he asked. I replied, "You can do it." He quickly responded, "No I can't." Being a new parent I still knew how to answer this response with the one my parents had often used with me: "What can *can't* do?" "*Can't* can't do anything," he responded as prepped. (Actually he probably said "*can't* can't do nothing," but I cleaned it up a little for some semblance of academic respect). I then asked him what can *can* do. He thought for a minute and replied, "*Can* can do... if people help him." This and so many other memories are still just as joyous as they were when they were mumbled fifteen years ago. (I apologize to my two other children. If I ever get to do this again, hopefully I can use one of your equally memorable stories!).

The year that I was president of the Rotary Club in Boiling Springs the international theme was "True happiness comes from helping others." Just as my son put it at the ripe age of two, it could be said that our joy in

life comes from helping others.

John 5:30 begins, "I can do nothing by myself...". My son knew this at two, as did the International Rotary president. Are we not glad that our Heavenly Father also knew that we needed help? He sent His Son and other Christians, both present and past, to guide us. He also gave us the scriptures and directs us with the Holy Spirit.

Joy, as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "a state of happiness or felicity; bliss." Felicity means fellowship, and bliss means complete happiness.

To expand upon the Rotary comment, should we not live our lives by sharing Christ's love, through our words and actions? To share this love to our Christian brothers and to those who do not know Christ is to share our bliss. Maybe then we will know true happiness. Maybe then they too "can do."

Leave it to God to go incognito and to slip into the human family by way of the back door of heaven. God came to us under the shadow of darkness into the manger of Bethlehem. There was no fanfare or red carpet. Under the stars of heaven and in plain view of the barnyard animals, God's unconventional arrival occurred.

The "baby of all babies" was born in such a mysterious manner and in such an inauspicious place. Most babies are wrapped in blankets but this God-child was not merely draped in "swaddling clothes" but in the garment of flesh. God came to be with us in that moment, to be like us—to look like us, to sound like us, to think like us—to be one of us! The church calls it Incarnation.

And it all happened by the Almighty sneaking past the human family that night. Not only is our God sneaky but he is also ingenious. What better way to understand the human condition than to experience birth in a barn. Life's messiest and smelliest conditions greeted the holy one.

God's "end around" through the birth of the Christ child not only signaled the divine arrival into the human experience but it also opened

up the delivery room doors for the whole world to be born that evening. At long last the promised hope of God had come and with it the possibility for all of us to be reborn. Not only was a baby born that night; Incarnation is God's pat on the human back hoping that we will take our first breath too!

But it all started with a baby. It was Mark Twain, I think, who once quipped, "A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on." In essence that was God's declaration that holy night in Bethlehem. There is hope for the future. There is reason to awaken to a new dawn. The prophetic longings are now fulfilled in the coming of the Christ child.

Be glad that God tipped the scales of human history that night, for in so doing the balance of the world was shifted forever. God chose the love route. The face of God came to us not through military might or secular power but through the subtle mercies of human birth. God did not have to do it this way but he did. And a world that had for centuries been holding its breath could now inhale God's air for the first time.

joy

**Monday
December 12**

Zechariah 1:7-17
Revelation 3:7-13
Matthew 24:15-31

*Danny West
Associate Professor
of Pastoral Studies,
School of Divinity*

joy

**Tuesday
December 13**

Zechariah 2:1-13
Revelation 3:14-22
Matthew 24:32-44

*Anthony Negbenebor
Professor of Economics and
Dean, School of Business*

It was one day in September 2005, the news of hurricane Katrina engulfed me as if I was in the midst of the stormy weather. I quickly turned on the television and for hours my eyes were glued to the screen trying to see if I could recognize any of the victims. I have family living in the state of Louisiana. I told my wife to call immediately and see if everyone was safe. She came back to me joyful but with great sadness for those that have been affected. I continue to watch the television solemnly with prayers for more survivors as I see the treacherous wind and flooding of houses in areas I have lived.

As I listened intensely to the survivors narrate their rescue stories, it reminded me of the story of the disciples traveling in the midst of the storm at the sea of Galilee. They were threatened by strong storms as they journeyed on their boat to Capernaum. In the midst of the storms, Jesus appeared to them—walking on water. As they pondered and their fear increased, Jesus called out “I am here, don’t be afraid.” He calmed the disciples’ hearts and showed them that he was more powerful than their problems or the storm which threatened them.

As we approach the season of Advent and we

experience the signs of His return (Matthew 24:32-44), Jesus wants you to know that He will be with you in the midst of life’s battles. At first, His presence may scare you or He may surprise you just as he did the disciples. But one thing is certain: He is by far more powerful than the mightiest storm or hurricane you may encounter. When you encounter Him and allow him to speak to your heart—“*I am here, don’t be afraid*”—you will never be the same again. Next time you are caught in “stormy seas,” call out to Jesus and have faith in His power. He will meet you where you are and His power will calm your fears.

Lord, teach me that you are much bigger and stronger than any problem or storm I may face.

Growing up I was the fourth of six children. Three years ahead of me was the one and only brother, who thought I was his scapegoat! Three years after me was the sweetest, most unpretentious frail and petite sister, who considered me a saint! Needless to say, there was tension in the family all year around except for during the two weeks of vacation.

I remember each year my parents demonstrated creativity on how we would spend the two weeks of vacation. Being a PK (Preacher's Kid), the location often was somewhere near the place where Dad was preaching a revival or leading a conference.

As long as I can remember, my parents' decision was made with our best interest in mind. They carefully crafted a route that would inform and at the same time create a space for renewal in our lives. Their decision for this vacation had nothing to do with how well we behaved during the year, or if our grades in school merited such a treat. They simply chose to reward us with unforgettable, life-changing, breath-taking experiences. Year after year, we lived with great expectations and wonders of how our time together would be.

The voice of the prophet is communicating

that the LORD has chosen Jerusalem (Zech. 3:2), that he is preparing the way for his "servant the Branch" (3:8) to come and do a mighty work of deliverance, far greater than that of any previous priest. The work of the servant would remove the guilt of the land "in a single day" (v. 9), liberating all, once and for all, from discontent and misery caused by sin. This liberation was not about personal merit. There was great expectation in the air. All would be invited to partake in a state of blessed peace (3:10).

We six children knew that at least two weeks out of the year we would experience a state of blessed peace that would in turn bind us together for life. We kept a close watch on what might happen, and when it did happen, our immature hearts were filled with a great joy.

May it be so at this season of Advent, and may our song be "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8).

joy

**Wednesday
December 14**

Zechariah 3:1-10
Revelation 4:1-8
Matthew 24:45-51

*Sophia Steibel
Associate Professor of
Religious Education,
School of Divinity*

joy

Thursday December 15

Zechariah 4:1-14
Revelation 4: 9-5:5
Matthew 25:1-13

Scot Lahaie
Assistant Professor and
Director of Theater,
Department of
Communication Studies

"... for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

When my children were young, we visited the local playground almost daily. I would sit on a bench and let the kids run around and climb and jump, with hopes that they would be sleepy at bedtime. And though my hopes were seldom realized—kids have a bubbly joy that seems to emerge from an endless well—I take with me one specific memory of the See-Saw. One particularly large child would sit on one end of the plank as two other less robust children would sit on the opposite end. And though the smaller children outnumbered their playmate by two to one, they were evenly balanced by weight. One side goes up and another comes down—an endless cycle of conflict between two ends. They can't both be up. When one rises, the other must descend. Thus is the nature of the See-Saw.

I find an important, although terribly simple, truth about joy in this story. Many things compete for our attention on the playground of our daily lives. Indeed, we are all very busy and live in a hectic and fast-paced world. The See-Saw is a metaphor for the emotional ups and downs we experience while just trying to get by. We all know that it is hard to be both happy and sad at the same time, for these are opposing

emotions. Joy can chase sadness away, or guilt or anger may steal your joy, if you are not careful. I want to suggest to you that joy is the heavier of the emotional offspring that run and climb and jump in the playground of our lives. The negative, competing emotions that we feel—anger, sadness, regret, guilt—may gang up against us two to one, but with such a sizable child on one end of the plank, we have hope. Joy will always spring back with a simple push off the ground. When one end is up, the other end must descend. There is no need to let our joy disappear in the face of adversity or struggle or heartache. It outweighs these other things two to one!

In this third week of Advent, we celebrate joy. It should not be a difficult thing at all. Yet, with Santa Claus and the shopping malls all crying out for attention, trying to fill our minds with so many things that are unimportant, it is essential for the Christian to stop and call to mind the reason for the celebration. For at Christmas—that is Christ's Mass—we celebrate the birth of our Savior, who is the God of love, the Prince of peace, and the bringer of hope. On this day, let us also remember that our joy in the Lord is a source of great strength.

Recently I suffered through a time of great emotional, spiritual and psychological distress. My belief in God never wavered; yet, I felt alone, sad and void of the spirit of life. I woke each morning with a heavy heart that seemed to stretch for an endlessly long period of time.

Two years ago my husband passed away. There was a new person in my life, but I could not seem to reconcile the past and the present. I felt disloyal to my deceased mate. I was tormented. I wanted to be sure of God's will for me and assured of the path I was to follow. In hindsight this seems too easy, but at the time I was in agony. I attended a support group, went for professional counseling, and spoke with my spiritual advisor and friends. I talked about life, death, God and the meaning of all these. We discussed how life on earth is temporal and pain is a part of living. The discussions and dialogue helped but I was still confused as to the direction my life should take. What was the meaning of all this for me? How did I reconcile my current life, and my future dreams, to my previous identification? Why did the future suddenly seem so mysterious and scary? It was all very overwhelming.

At last, in desperation, I ventured to an island

on a month long quest for God's will: Seeking the return of a peaceful serenity to my soul. I spent many hours alone searching for the answers. I walked on the beautiful white beaches collecting shells. While snorkeling I marveled at the unseen world of God's wondrous creatures lying below the surface of the ocean. I sailed high above the earth like a human kite and reverently attended church with the local population. I prayed endlessly, searching, searching, and ever searching.

At the end of my month long quest, I shared my frustration with a friend. It was time to leave and I still had no answer. On the day before I was to return home my wise friend smiled and said, "But you do have your answer. The answer is there is no answer—that is why it is called 'faith'." Those simple words allowed me to see God's will for me. What a joy to have at last experienced such a beautiful revelation—a simple faith in God's grace. I cannot know the future, but I can know and trust God. I can and do know faith.

joy

**Friday
December 16**

Zechariah 7:8-8:8
Revelation 5:6-14
Matthew 25:16-30

*Deborah Wittig
Associate Professor of
Sociology, Department of
Social Sciences*

joy

Saturday December 17

Zechariah 8:9-17
Revelation 6:1-17
Matthew 25:31-46

Terry L. Fern
Professor of Music,
Department of Fine Arts

"Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take Your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

"Since the creation of the world!" I'm impressed! That certainly is not out of the ordinary considering God's attributes. Not only are we reminded and encouraged to look ahead this time of year, but God clearly demonstrates the same by encouraging us to look forward to an incredible inheritance and to a kingdom prepared on our behalf. Such love and foresight as that is indeed overwhelming, for I know myself, and I am not sure I would have been so generous. That is typical of God's love and His grace which continues to be announced to us in messages such as those also found in Advent hymns. These are wonderful reminders of both His great goodness and our great need.

"Come thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free from our fears and sins release us." Advent hymns such as this remind us that it is not just from the wages of sin we can be set free, but it should also be from the "fears" of sin. We human beings can have great intention. We may say, "I *will* keep a good spirit about such and such" or "I *shall not* get

upset if this and that happens." But intentions are lame if we do not claim God's promises such as those set forth in Matthew 25, if we do not claim the victory spoken of in the hymn text that Jesus was indeed "born to set thy people free." We may say, "I know, Lord, that I must experience some difficult times, but surely not too difficult, not too upsetting to my plans." We allow fears to beset and sin to enclose us. These "fears" are of course otherwise known as "worries." The Advent hymn continues, "Let us find our rest in thee... Hope of all the earth thou art. Rule in all our hearts alone... Raise us to thy glorious throne." Until we "find our rest" in Him, we will still be prone to place conditions on what our King has promised us and to worry about the "such and such" and "this and that" which may cross our path in our quest to follow God's will.

How appropriate! The King spoken of in Matthew 25 has already prepared our Kingdom and our Inheritance. We must "rest" and "hope" in Him. If we "allow" Him to rule in our hearts alone, then, when the time comes, He will raise us to His throne to accept our inheritance and kingdom. In the spirit of the glorious music heard in Handel's *Messiah*: "Hallelujah ! Hallelujah!"

Has there ever been a time, a place or a people which hasn't written about, wrestled with, agonized over, or sung about love? From "All we need is love," to "What's love got to do with it," to "the greatest of these is love," our world hungers for love, often settling for it "in all the wrong places." Happily, God has sent love into our broken and hurting world. The three selected readings today speak to why God's love is necessary—because we have sinned (Genesis 3:8-15); how God has chosen to love us—through the cross (Revelation 12:1-10); and who His great lover is—Jesus (John 3:16-21).

While at first glance Revelation 12:1-10 may not seem like a passionate love story, much less a Christmas story, upon closer inspection we discover God's love described in all of its fullness. Picturing a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, the scripture declares that light has triumphed over darkness (12:1). Continuing this victory theme, the woman is about to bear a child who will defeat the great red dragon—that ancient serpent (12:9)—and symbol of evil known the world over. This "male child" (12:5a), the one born to do battle with the darkness, does His battle most strikingly in His innocence. He does not take up a sword or a conventional weapon with which to assault the evil monster.

Rather, He allows Himself to be "taken up to God" (12:5c). Leaving little to the imagination, the vision we see is one of Jesus being born to die. Unwilling to defeat the Devil by means of human warfare, Jesus takes up as His weapon His very own self-sacrificial and suffering love. Yes, Jesus is willing to be devoured (12:4b) by the dragon because He will not (cannot!) become meaner than the Devil in order to defeat him.

The ancient deceiver has been thrown down (12:9), not by brute force, but because he violated the very standard of justice by which he accuses every man and woman. Having failed to find Jesus guilty, and being unable to deceive Him, Satan proceeded nevertheless to execute the innocent Child. In carrying out this unjust execution, Satan lost his place as prosecutor (Job 1:6) in the heavenly court and he was disbarred, "thrown down" (12:9, 10), and shall never accuse the "brethren" (12:10) again.

This is God's great love story, the Christmas story revealed to us from the cross. The cross is the love that set Handel (and I hope us too!) to singing: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and his name shall be called, Wonderful...the Prince of Peace."

Love

**Sunday
December 18**

Genesis 3: 8-15
Revelation 12:1-10
John 3:16-21

*Robert Canoy
Associate Professor of
Theology and Associate
Dean, School of Divinity*

Love

Monday December 19

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Titus 1:1-16

Luke 1:1-25

David M. Carscaddon

*Associate Professor and Chair,
Department of Psychology and
Counseling*

"The trick to painting a room," my father once told me, "is preparation." Preparation makes our activities—like painting a room—go so much better. The same is true of our faith. As a liturgical season, Advent helps us to prepare our lives for the anniversary of Christ's birthday and to remember his first coming. Advent also reminds us to be ready for his second coming. The prophet Zephaniah, the apostle Paul, and the evangelist Luke echo this message of preparation in sacred scripture.

The three readings are a beautiful reminder of the importance of preparing our hearts for Christ's birth and his return. Preparation takes effort, and so the prophet Zephaniah tells the people of Zion: "Let not thy hands be weakened" by fear, but remember that God is "in their midst;" and "the Lord hath taken away thy judgment," and "He will save" us from our own destruction. Zephaniah, through the working of the Holy Spirit, tells us of God's cure for our weaknesses, namely prayer and following God's law.

In Paul's letter to Titus, he speaks of the kind of person that should minister to the early churches. Preparation means possessing a readiness for action. Paul lists for Titus those qualities that prepare a person to be a good presbyter. For example, the presbyter should be

"given to hospitality, gentle, sober, just, holy, content," and "embracing that faithful word which is according to doctrine, that he may be able to exhort in sound doctrine, and to convince the gainsayers."

In Luke's gospel, we learn of the angel Gabriel's message to Zechariah. Preparation means change, and change can be a challenging ordeal at times. For Zechariah change meant being unable to speak until his son was born. The theme of preparation is continued in this reading when the angel tells Zechariah that his son (John the Baptist) will "go before the Lord" and that he may "turn the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the incredulous to the wisdom of the just, to prepare unto the Lord a perfect people."

Therefore, the lessons of preparation learned in our readings can be seen in three ways: preparation of our hearts, preparation through our actions, and preparation through challenging others. Preparing our hearts comes from the prayerful joy of knowing God's liberating salvation. Preparation of action comes from our loving response to God's free gift of salvation. Finally, helping others prepare means appealing to their best qualities and when necessary challenging their weaknesses.

Fortunately for me, I was raised by loving, self-sacrificing parents. For example, when I was 15, my dad sold his beloved golf clubs to buy a set of drums I thought I would die without. As each of my siblings was born, I watched my mother give up more and more of her wants to fulfill our needs—and wants. We were truly taught by example the Christian life of giving and self-sacrifice as Jesus himself taught his disciples. My eighty year old mother still gives at every bloodmobile she can.

As a mother and grandmother, one of my greatest loves is children. Until you experience the birth of children, it is hard to explain the outpouring of love you immediately feel for this helpless wonder in your arms. They are the reason I understand the love my parents felt for their children and grandchildren and why they were willing to sacrifice for us. So even though I have experienced sacrifice as a parent, I cannot begin to know what God must have felt as He sent his only Son as a child to our world only to have Him sacrificed on the cross. What must Mary have felt as she looked upon Jesus for the first time knowing this precious little baby was the Son of God? Did she really believe He would someday die such a cruel death for the sins of others even though He was sinless?

Imagine the heartbreak she must have suffered as she watched Him die for you and me—what a huge sacrifice!

Although I had known that I had a heavenly Father most of my life, He truly became my Father through the years of raising children. Maybe the trials of parenthood and now trying to keep up with grandchildren have made me more aware of this. I just know that my prayers begin with “Father” now. At this time of year, I am especially reminded of the deep love our Father had for us to send His only Son to earth only to have Christ suffer and sacrifice through death for our salvation.

As you spend time in prayer this Advent season, may you experience your Father's hope, peace, joy and love, but most of all His love. Then follow His command given in Acts 1:8 and share His love and reason for sacrifice with your “neighbor” as you await His return.

Love

**Tuesday
December 20**

1 Samuel 2:1b-10
Titus 2:1-10
Luke 1:26-38

*Becky Newton
Administrative Assistant
to the Provost*

Love

Wednesday December 21

2 Samuel 7:1-17
Titus 2:11-3:8a
Luke 1:39-56

*Doug Bryan
Professor of Religious
Education and Chair,
Department of Religious
Studies and Philosophy*

Weeks of preparation are moments away from being fulfilled in the celebrations of December 25. We've wrapped presents, written greetings, enjoyed Christmas music, planned meals, and decorated church and home. We've been reminded of our blessings and prosperity, as we recall those lives less fortunate. Many of the world's citizens are displaced, unemployed, grieving, and hungry. Whether it is in times of prosperity or despair, Advent comes.

Like David, we may reflect upon our own prosperity and our desire to honor God. A successful David desired to honor God with a house. Such houses of deity were common in David's day. For some, the house represented the deity's dwelling place. The house may also have represented the deity's endorsement of the authority of the political rulers. Another common theme of the day was the belief in the localization of the deity. Some deities were strongest in specified locations.

How surprised David must have been when Nathan brought the word that David was not to build the temple! The passage clearly teaches that Yahweh was not confined to one location, but Yahweh's presence had gone with the people in their journeys in the Promised Land. Politically and theologically, God was

not to be too closely defined, localized, and controlled. In many respects, our understanding of the work of God is also limited and imperfect. A temple would be built but within God's time, plan, purpose and person.

What theological irony! While David had wanted to give God a house, instead, God promises David a house (dynasty) that would be endless and not limited to one location. God's love would never depart from David's descendants. While there would be the chastisement of a loving father, God's love would be ever present.

Often we are like David. We make plans and dream dreams. Yet, God surprises us by making dreams, beyond our limited imagination, a reality. So it is with Advent. We make the preparations in anticipation and in remembrance of the Savior's birth. In some respects, we try to make Christmas, but Christmas is an act of God. May we not get lost in our own plans and expectations that we fail to wait, to listen, to watch and to respond to God's person and work in Advent. Keep our minds, hearts and eyes open to the surprises of God!

Why is it so hard for us to trust God with every aspect of our lives? Why do we want to wrest control from Him when faced with the many decisions that flood our days? Why do we insist on plowing ahead in our own strength?

Is it stubbornness, indifference, pride, spiritual blindness, a lack of understanding of God's power, or something else? Maybe it is a combination of several excuses. Whatever the reason, we miss blessings and opportunities for spiritual growth when we attempt to "go it alone."

We have story after story in scripture of how much God loves His people and makes provision for them. We have story after story of how people, despite witnessing these miracles, healings, and deliverances, turned their backs on Him and became wholly dependent on their own intellect and logic. In many cases, this proved to be a fatal mistake.

Often times when studying the Old Testament scriptures, I have been amazed at how quickly people forget God's intervention on their behalf, His unchanging grace and mercy. "How could they have such short memories, be so blind, so shallow, so indifferent?" I thought.

But aren't those of us who live today more culpable? We have both the historical accounts in scripture as well as our own experiences to solidify our trust in God's power, yet still don't respond as we should.

How quick we are to accept help in human form: the aid of a stranger when we have a flat tire in unfriendly surroundings, the advice of a friend when making a major financial decision, the expertise of a professional when facing a physical or emotional crisis. There is nothing wrong with this. Scripture instructs us to seek Godly counsel from those around us. We need to draw on the talents and gifts God has given to others.

Yet when we ignore the all-powerful Creator of the universe who is waiting to walk beside us on our life's journey, we miss the greatest resource of all.

As we celebrate the gift of Christ during this special Advent season, let us commit anew to be cognizant of God's presence and draw upon His strength at all times during the year.

Love

**Thursday
December 22**

2 Samuel 7:18-29
Galatians 3:1-14
Luke 1:57-66

Jeff Tubbs
*Associate Vice President for
Records and Registration*

Love

**Friday
December 23**

Isaiah 59:1-15a
Galatians 3:14-22
Luke 1:67-80

*Mary Roby
Associate Director
of the Library*

When you are the wife of the music minister, the phrase "Christmas rush" takes on new meaning. Not only do you have to take care of the normal holiday activities such as shopping and cooking, but you must also attend multiple rehearsals, performances and those church-related Christmas parties. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is little more than controlled chaos with one event flowing into the next. It is the rare evening when you are able to get home before 10. Sheer exhaustion begins to overtake your spirit. It is often difficult to find peace amid the tumult. At some point, I have to stop myself and remember that even with this hectic schedule, this is my favorite season of the year. Advent is all about preparation: preparing music, drama and worship services to be presented during that time. But it is also about preparing my heart and mind for the coming of Christ. That preparation must be foremost in my life in order to fully realize the meaning of Advent. As Christmas Eve approaches, I hope that you have been able to find peace amid the chaos during this Advent season. Jesus himself epitomized a life of contrasting realities as is so wonderfully depicted in a poem, "Christus Paradox," by Sylvia Dunstan. This rich text set to music by Alfred Fedak has become one of my favorite choral anthems. May these words

enable you to continue to prepare for the coming of Christ.

You, Lord are both Lamb and Shepherd. You,
Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, peacemaker and sword-bringer of the way
you took and gave.

You, the everlasting instant;
You, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain, stripped
of might upon the cross,
Shining in eternal glory, beggar'd by a soldier's
toss,

You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us, sit in power
at God's side.

You, who preach a way that's narrow, have a
love that reaches wide.

You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus! Worth is our
cosmic Christ!

Worthy your defeat and vict'ry. Worthy still
your peace and strife.

You, the everlasting instant;
You, who are our death and life.

As a child, I had mixed feelings on Christmas Eve. On the one hand, I was excited. I wondered what was going to be under the tree the next morning. To be more accurate, I wondered what would be there for me! At the same time, I was afraid. "He knows if you are sleeping; he knows if you're awake," the song said. I didn't know how Santa Claus could tell whether I was asleep or just had my eyes shut, but I didn't question. Sleep and Santa! No sleep, no Santa! What if I didn't go to sleep? So the harder I tried to sleep, the more awake I seemed to be. You can understand my feelings of anticipation and anxiety. In fact, feelings of all kinds are a part of the Christmas season. Feelings are accentuated. Families reunite and delight in presents and the presence of each other. But the family next door has an empty seat where a husband, a father, a grandfather used to sit as he led the family in a blessing each Christmas Eve. He died last June, and the rest of the family keeps thinking, "This is our first Christmas without him." How do you think this family feels?

The Gospel reading for Christmas Eve from Matthew 1:18-25 does mention a feeling. Fear! Apparently sensing the fear that Joseph had when he was about to be told to marry a woman who was already expecting a child, the

angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Ghost."

There is fear in this story, but what is more remarkable is the sheer obedience that Joseph had to God's purpose. The Gospel says nothing about how Joseph felt about this sudden rearrangement of his life. Matthew says Joseph "did as the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife." God didn't ask Joseph, "How do you feel about this?" Maybe, this is a reminder that the deepest things in life are true regardless of how we feel. God breaks into the world. God loves us. You and I are called to care for others. We love our enemies not because we feel it's the right thing to do, but because God commands it.

I remember these feelings I had as a child. I wanted to go to sleep. I couldn't wait to awaken. I guess the older I got, the more I realize that while I do some things because I feel like it, I do a lot of things because I believe it's the right thing. The word is obedient! Joseph did what God commanded, and when you and I awaken tomorrow, we'll celebrate the coming of the Christ. We'll also remember a man who did the right thing.

Love

**Saturday
December 24**

Isaiah 59:15b-21
Galatians 3:23-4:7
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 1:18-25

Charles Bugg

*Professor of Church
Ministry and Leadership
and Dean, School of
Divinity*

Love

**Sunday
December 25**

Micah 4:1-5; 5:2-4
I John 4:7-16
John 3:31-36

*Frank Bonner,
President of the University*

My wife Flossie and I spent Christmas 2003 in New York City. Our married daughters and their families spend Thanksgiving with one set of in-laws and Christmas with the other, and the next year they will reverse the pattern. 2003 was the year we had had them home for Thanksgiving, and Flossie and I were on our own for Christmas. So it was off to New York for the holidays. I will confess that on Christmas morning my thoughts were entirely on the sights of the city and the show at Radio City Music Hall that afternoon. Attending Mass at St. Patrick's simply seemed like something we "ought to do" on Christmas morning. What began with my perfunctory attitude turned into one of the most moving depictions of God's love that I have heard. In contrast to the almost romanticized images of the Christmas story we have grown up with (think manger scenes, Christmas plays at school), the Archbishop of New York graphically portrayed two struggling young people, the young woman "great with child," making an incredibly arduous journey. These are not privileged, well-to-do people. The young man, though called a carpenter, is what we would today call a construction worker. At the end of an exhausting journey, even a shelf to sleep on, in what could be described as a lean-to, is not available to them. Instead they are fortunate to be able to share space with stable

animals, perhaps in a cave. The question was inescapable—and this was certainly the Archbishop's intent—why would God bring about the *birth of his Son* in *these* conditions?

The Archbishop moved then into what was clearly the second point of his message. In the society of that day, shepherds were among the very lowest of the low—economically, socially, and politically. So looked down upon and distrusted were shepherds that they were not allowed to testify in court. Yet it was to these that God delivered the announcement of the birth of His Son—not to royalty, diplomats, or the socially elite. Again—why? The Archbishop moved seamlessly into a description of the plight of the homeless in New York and others around the world in like circumstances. It is impossible to relate his message—you had to have heard it. But I suspect that I was not the only one attempting to hold back tears.

Why? Why would God have His Son born into those circumstances, into that hardship? Why did he announce that birth to the lowliest?

His love is without limit, and His love is without condition. It is "not that we loved God but that he loved us. . . ."

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